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DIPLOMA MILLS AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

Michael Simonson
Co-editor

What are the warning signs? Degrees for cash, credit for life experiences, no regional accreditation, and few or no faculty—the indicators of diploma mills are easy to spot.

A recent (June 25, 2004) issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* dedicated more than 30 pages to articles about the proliferation of diploma mills. While distance education was not an important theme of the articles, the implications were clear. Institutions with no campuses, with no faculty or only part-timers, with questionable accreditation, and with major Web promotions, are some of the characteristics of diploma mills. Unfortunately, this list reminds many of distance education institutions, too.

Why should those in distance education be concerned about diploma mills, anyway? A careful reading of the June 25 *Chronicle* gives the reader cause to reflect. One wonders if the editors of the *Chronicle* were taking a not-too-subtle jab at the growing field of distance education.

In some minds, the critical examination of the new wave of educational opportunities that fall under the heading of distance education is well deserved. Education is too important an endeavor to tolerate the illegitimate racketeers,

especially ones that are profiting from the current technology-driven evolution of education.

Distance education leaders should be concerned about diploma mills. The concept of distance education is a new idea for most. It is an approach not understood by many and, because of its rapid growth, is easily criticized by some. Distance educators could ignore their critics or attempt to discredit them. However, a different tactic would better serve the field.

The critics of distance education should be invited to examine curricula, to scrutinize courses, and even to test students. Institutions that offer education at a distance should seek the most rigorous and demanding of accreditation. There is no need for “alternative accreditation” if distance education courses, programs, and institutions are of the highest quality.

Distance education is, first of all, education. Seeking out and clearly addressing the concerns of critics is a first step. The field need not worry about its place in the future: that is guaranteed by the inevitability of technological advancement. Diploma mills are one dirty little corner of the future. Diploma mills used to advertise on a technology of the last century—the matchbook cover. Now they promote themselves on the technology of this century—

the Internet. Leaders in distance education can help isolate purveyors of “education without effort” as the thieves they are by demanding that institutions that offer courses to distance

learners have the highest of standards, monitored by the harshest of judges, and open to the view of any who wish to see.